



# Curatorial Safety

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## Special Tour and Open House Fire Safety

Throughout the year, but especially at the holidays, many historic sites across the country hold open houses, “candlelight tours,” and other special events featuring after hours activities, augmented interpretive programs, lectures, food and drink, cooking and historic crafts demonstrations, and the like. If your site is planning such an event, here are a few fire safety guidelines to ensure that everyone is safe: visitors, staff, and the resource.

- 1. Do not use “live” burning candles for your “candle light tour.”** An open flame within a historic structure, especially a candle, is a recipe for disaster! Candles can be dropped, knocked over, or come into contact with drapes, clothing, wood or other combustibles and start a fire. Before the advent of safer heating, cooking, and lighting alternatives, fire was an ever-present danger threatening the very survival of structures. Utilize electric “candles” or lanterns instead. For example, Mount Vernon features electric candles at their annual December “Mount Vernon by Candlelight” tour. They also dim the electric lights to approximate the illumination levels of 18<sup>th</sup> century fixtures. You might also be able to use reproduction hand held metal lanterns (such as 18<sup>th</sup> century punched tin examples) illuminated with a small flashlight.
- 2. Do not light fires in historic fireplaces.** Some historic sites use their fireplaces in the winter, for heat, ambience, or for hearth cooking demonstrations. This can be very dangerous. Old chimney flues and fireplaces can contain combustible creosote, or can be cracked or otherwise damaged, exposing fire and sparks to wood building products and causing a flue or structural fire. Hot coals on the hearth and sparks from the fire could also injure staff or visitors, especially children, or damage collections.
- 3. Hold all cooking demonstrations outdoors in a fire ring away from any potential combustibles** such as dry grass, trees, tents, etc. At least one staff member should always watch the fire. Have a fire extinguisher within reach in case of emergency and always keep children away from the fire.
- 4. Avoid the use of electric space heaters within historic structures.** Although electric space heaters have sometimes been employed within historic structures during winter daytime hours to provide for the comfort of visitors and staff, for safety’s sake, such use should probably be avoided.

### Resources

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Online, on the web at <http://www.nfpa.org>.

U.S. Forest Service, Oklahoma District. *Campfire Safety*. On the web at <http://www.fs.fed.us/oonf/oklahoma/campfire.html>.